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Social Cognition

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Social Cognition

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- 1 As France seems to discover 'cultural studies'—via the analysis of American television series in some university departments that study literature or media—cultural studies in the English-speaking world are being displaced by new interdisciplinary approaches with a different arsenal of tools. In their initial phase, cultural studies expanded the scope of analysis of different arts and media into complex social phenomena, with such analytical notions as class, gender and ethnicity.¹ Their legacy cannot be scorned, especially in the British works of the Birmingham School with their emphasis on the folk culture of the lower classes. Cultural studies now, at least in some circles, remain mired in the shallow swamp of reiterated analysis of the superficial aspects of the appearances of popular culture. They seem to have lost what made them successful and allowed them to reach their initial goal: the place of reception and the interpretation of cultural representations.
- 2 One problem with cultural studies is methodological. Self-report and self-perceptions are not easily shareable and duplicable methods. They elude newcomers. Simple reproduction of methods from other areas isn't always possible. Persistently addressing complex media processes as 'text'—an all too frequent practice by newcomers to the field—has created epistemological limitations, as mass media, mix media and transmedia do not produce texts alone, despite the enduring supremacy of story-telling. The loss of perspective on reception as well as the disconnects between reception and message production can be perceived as accepting commercial media fare without questioning it in categories other than the familiar ones of gender and race. As cultural studies remain unconnected to issues that remain salient in the new media age, such as the political economy of production, the risks of harmful content and harmful behavior, the effects of propaganda, not to mention emerging issues such as traceability on the so-called 'social media,' privacy on ubiquitous mobile devices or friendship on anonymous transnational networks, they run the risk of falling behind their times and missing the cognitive turn.
- 3 Such is not the case with social cognition, as an emerging field of inquiry. If, in the evolution of media theory, cultural studies are associated with the research tradition of

'uses and gratifications,' social cognition tilts partly in favor of 'effects' theory as it considers how individuals form attitudes, values and beliefs using media representations. It highlights the mechanisms behind media use and the cognitive consequences of such use for individuals and groups. The outcome of messages is considered significant for stereotyping, voting and risk management, for instance. The cultivation processes implied by the use of the media— priming, framing or selective attention and recall—can explain how media tend to perpetuate stereotypes and yet can change existing beliefs and modify perceptions over time.

- 4 Social cognition emerged in the early 1980s, with the book by Michael Roloff and Charles R. Berger, *Communication and Social Cognition*.² Originating in psychology research, the work focused on the interactions of people around social information. It looked at the cognitive processes that are involved when people think about their interactions in the world, without separating message design from message storage and perception. By now, social cognition has received new inputs from neurosciences and mind theory, enabling the shift from behaviorism and its rather exclusive focus on measurable responses and decomposable, discrete and stable elements. Another shift has led to the inclusion of situation as a cognitive tool to incorporate social learning in a process that accounts for local and socially constructed worlds, with distributed information sharing that goes beyond the individual. Situated cognition thus sheds a new light on the notion of culture as distributed cognitive network.
- 5 The key notions and concepts of social cognition have spread into the larger fields of sociology, anthropology, philosophy, semiotics and linguistics. It has come to take on communication as a major area of research, with particular interest for media as providers of social information (in addition to family and peers). It has applied the insights of the cognitive turn to the challenges to identity-formation, stereotyping, opinion-making and problem-solving, posed by a rapidly changing media environment.
- 6 The main areas of scholarship have to do with message production, interpersonal communication, social influence and old/new media processes. The research questions are related to how social information is encoded and retrieved from memory in the shape of specific representations; how individuals build social knowledge from them and finally how they pass social judgments that eventually lead to decision-making and action-taking.
- 7 Among the most exciting developments, the areas of message production and the combination of interpersonal and mass communication interactions have detonated an explosion of theories and case-studies. Message production processes combine with political economy of media to take into account design and multiple goal-planning to manage representations and organize their storage and retrieval. People interested in social influence have benefited also from such research. Looking at the role of affect and emotion can help identify beliefs and attitudes derived from memory and past experiences. Notions such as social scripts and schemata, norm accessibility and heuristic modeling can lead to an understanding of how persuasion works via media. Interpersonal interactions around relationships and groups is also crucial to understanding this age of broadband networked media, where sense-making with others is connected to group negotiation and attribution processes that produce a shared understanding of reality. Social cognition thus provides compelling arguments and methods for recombining issues of gender and race with notions of attention, memory and attribution.

- 8 Importantly, social cognition has recognized the limitations of analyzing an audience from the perspective of text comprehension. Researchers can now insist on the differences between text comprehension and media comprehension, because of added visual and audio dimensions. The complexity of this area implies a whole array of new methodologies. Situation models and mental models related to prior experience and shared common interpretations can have meaning independent of an idiosyncratic analysis of a media story. Mental maps and constructs in memory help decode the implicit message of a media rather than its literal representation. Drawing from dynamic and cinematic features (editing and music mostly) can provide cues for making inferences about the story unconnected to text and dialogue. Elements of activation, attribution and recall can be solicited without being actually verbalized but rather visualized as suggested by the “dual code theory” proposed by Allan Paivio.³ He posits that visual and verbal information are not in the same place in memory and are processed differently in the brain is an example of the independence of a cognitive effect from a narrative effect, with references to the reality and the felt experience of the viewer.
- 9 Finally, the consolidated digital media environment as well as globalized phenomena of message production and reception call for new perspectives that afford more synthetic views, while maintaining a sustained attention on trends toward diversification. The new media age challenges researchers to expand their inquiry beyond single units such as the narrative space of a sit-com, into the continuous experience of media including ads, station breaks, pop ups but also the recycling of media fare from the linear audiovisual system to the non-linear internet system. Special attention should be directed to how the two subsystems of the digital era will evolve as TV-based developments increase together with computer-based developments. Far from being displaced, online television remains a major source of story-telling, as narrative remains a central piece of social learning and interaction. The audiovisual networks are still the providers of dominant narratives that are then recycled on the social networks. There is a 'shuttle screen' situation in which activity on the surface screen of audiovisual media is discussed within the deep bottom screen of social media with feedback and feedforward loops that are reflected in all sorts of formats including film, series or games. Audiences engage in a variety of interactions such as ranking, mixing and aggregating content and as a result engage in activities where their performance online and offline are part of their daily world and larger culture. The many modes of interaction with media (one to one, one to many, many to many, a few to many) as well as the awareness that these modes have built-in power structures, create a powerful urge to reshape the research agenda of media studies.
- 10 How theory is translated into methods becomes crucial in such a context and social cognition requires interdisciplinarity just as cultural studies did, as it gets beyond flawed dichotomies and superficial contradictions to provide more comprehensive insights on social interactions. Within major established disciplines it chooses subdisciplines whose boundaries can be sutured together. Thus social cognition can recombine social influence with information systems, political communication, visual communication, and even artificial intelligence. It implies the creation of a concerted and explicit methodological scaffolding. The innovations, intuitions and stop gaps need formalization and testing by researchers furthering the field of inquiry.
- 11 Researchers should explain their concepts as well as their methods and practices. Thus reflecting on and offering a frank evaluation of the implementation and results of interdisciplinarity is an important cognitive posture that actually affects

interdisciplinarity itself. In the new media age, characterized by the prevalence of online representations and activities over offline media use, such a new approach to reality can be seen either as transgressive or transformative. It may lead to controversial stances, as the boundaries between 19th century disciplines are punctured. Cognitive interdisciplinarity is also geared at problem-solving and supposes a catalytic process around a specific problem or project. This calls for research practices where the investigator needs to rely on distributed intelligence and collaborative work to tackle the question at hand. The practice of such research requires a multidisciplinary approach grounded in complementary competences as single researchers do not have the time and resources to manage alone the numerous variables that media representations entail.

- 12 Even though self-reporting remains a method that can yield reflexive benefits, it is critical to go beyond such a method to make claims about media outcomes. The methods yielding promising results imply a combination of virtual ethnography, rhetorical criticism, focus groups, behavioral observations, field work, questionnaires, video-assisted recording, computer-aided mapping and even generating responses to hypothetical situations. Computer-enhanced techniques such as reaction time measures, recognition measures, multidimensional scaling and even eye-tracking techniques, not unconnected to magnetic resonance imaging (MRI), also need to be integrated in this scaffolding as well as collaborative tools. Computer-aided social cognition research could then track relationships between representation and beliefs, in a real-time environment. It could follow the negotiations around narratives produced in the shuttle-screen situation, as audiences migrate from television series to fanfiction sites in their transmedia experiences. It might be able to monitor socially revealing behavior as self-disclosure practices and conversations create an impression over large cohorts. The current experiments in neuro-marketing and in online fund-raising strategies during elections already point at the social uses that such methods can produce.
- 13 The direction of social cognition thus remains very open. In the new media era however, the theories with most promise are related to “actor-networks,”⁴ “lifelongings,”⁵ “transmedia storytelling”⁶ and socialization via “transliteracies.”⁷ They are promising as they make it possible to bridge a number of disciplinary boundaries underlying research programs in media and representations, past and present, Western and non-Western. Social cognition can benefit from approaches and methods that foster non-linear, non-causal logics of investigation, and be free from laboratory conditions of observation (often criticized for their lack of relation to reality). By integrating notions such as situation, they can give full extent to relations that are not necessarily causal but cultural. They can thus amplify the research agenda, recombining virtual and real relations, digital and mental maps, etc. They can open the fan of methods that recombine quantitative and qualitative explorations and explore new territories as they invest new ways of collecting data, especially those that concern the interactions between individuals and their communities. It can thus provide deep knowledge, that is to say a critical understanding of reticular, multi-causal, multi-polar and process dynamics at work in media interactions and modes of socialization.
- 14 Such interactions and processes are oriented by institutions and technological changes, which in turn affect reception and media use. So issues of power, property, regulation are just as important to take into account, to highlight mechanisms of alienation as well as integration by media and their representations. The negotiated relations between the public and private spheres, the local and global levels, the on-line and off-line shuttle

screens and story-telling are critical directions for research, and part of the process of socialization that is still vastly under-researched and under-theorized.

NOTES

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